



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE



Christin Khan / NEFSC

Family: Physeteridae
Population: 200,000 – 1,500,000
Status: Vulnerable
Length: 10.97—
 18.29m/36—60ft.
Weight: 13608—
 40823kg/15—45 tons

Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

Description

Sperm whales are the largest of the odontocetes (toothed whales) and the most sexually dimorphic with males considerably larger than females. Sperm whales have an extremely large head that is about one quarter of the total body length. The skin behind the head is often wrinkled in contrast to the smooth tight skin of other whales. They are dark gray and have a very narrow and rod-like lower jaw.

Habitat and Distribution

Sperm whales are distributed worldwide from the equator to the edges of the polar pack ice. They usually occur in deep, offshore waters near canyons, banks, and over continental slopes.

Sounds

Sperm whales make the loudest sounds produced by any animal! Their vocalizations are usually described as ‘clicks’ or ‘creak’ and are used for both echolocation and social communication with other members of the pod.

Feeding

Sperm whales feed primarily on squid on or near the ocean bottom. They also occasionally eat octopus, rays, sharks, and bony fish.

Threats

Although sperm whales are no longer hunted, they continue to face anthropogenic (human-caused) threats including ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear.

Fun Fact

Herman Melville’s classic novel *Moby Dick* tells the tale of hunting a rare white sperm whale!